



4woman.gov

800-994-WOMAN (9662)

888-220-5446 (TDD)

The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



Frequently Asked Questions about Health Problems in African American Women

What health problems affect a lot of African American women?

Overweight and Obesity

Being overweight or obese increases your risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, breathing problems, arthritis, gallbladder disease, sleep apnea (breathing problems while sleeping), osteoarthritis and some cancers. Obesity is measured with a Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI shows the relationship of weight to height. Women with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 are considered overweight, while women with a BMI of 30 or more are considered obese. All adults (aged 18 years or older) who have a BMI of 25 or more are considered at risk for premature death and disability from being overweight or obese. These health risks increase as the BMI rises. Your health care provider can help you figure out your body mass or go to www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm. Not only are health care providers concerned about how much fat a person has, but also where the fat is located on the body. Women with a "pear" shape tend to store fat in their hips and buttocks. Women with an "apple" shape store fat around their waists. For most women, carrying extra weight around their waists or middle (with a waist larger than 35 inches) raises health risks (like heart disease, diabetes, or cancer) more than carrying extra weight around their hips or thighs. Fifty percent of adult African American women are obese. If you are overweight or obese, losing weight can lower your risk for many diseases. And physical activity is an important part of weight loss treatment. Try to be active (30 minutes most days of the week is best) and eat better to help prevent and treat obesity.

Diabetes (dye-uh-bee-tees)

You can get diabetes if your body does not use insulin right. Insulin is what is in your body that changes the sugars in food into energy. Type one diabetes happens when your body destroys its own cells that make insulin. Type 2 diabetes occurs when the pancreas doesn't make enough insulin. Diabetes affects women of all ages. Overall, African Americans are twice as likely to have diabetes than Whites.

A growing number of children are getting type 2 diabetes. Children have a greater chance of getting type 2 diabetes if they are overweight or if a family member has it. Type 2 diabetes is becoming more common in African American children under 20 years old.

People with diabetes have a higher chance of having problems with their skin, mouth, kidneys, heart, nerves, eyes, and feet. African Americans experience higher rates of at least three of diabetes' most serious complications: eye disease, amputation and kidney failure. Although type one diabetes cannot be prevented, there are steps you can take to prevent and control type 2 diabetes:

- See your health care providers regularly. Don't forget about the dentist and eye doctor!
- Don't smoke.

- Control your blood sugar and cholesterol levels, your blood pressure, and your weight.
- Exercise (30 minutes most days of the week is best).
- Check your feet everyday for blisters, red spots, swelling, or cuts.
- Stay aware of how you feel-if you notice a problem, call your health care provider right away.

High blood pressure

High blood pressure happens when blood cannot flow easily through your blood vessels. This creates pressure in your vessels, which damages the vessels and strains your heart. As a result, blood doesn't flow as well to your brain or kidneys, and you can have a heart attack, stroke, or kidney failure. The number of African Americans with high blood pressure is high: one out of three African Americans have it. Certain factors increase your chances of having high blood pressure: increasing age (middle aged or older), diabetes, obesity (or being overweight), alcohol use, eating too much salt, a family history of high blood pressure, and not exercising.

Kidney disease

Your kidneys clean your blood and keep waste out. With kidney disease, they don't work as well as they should-they could even completely shut down. High blood pressure and diabetes are two main causes of kidney disease. Controlling your blood sugar and blood pressure will help prevent kidney disease. Diabetes is the leading cause of kidney failure in African Americans. African Americans tend to have kidney failure at an earlier age than Whites.

HIV/AIDS

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is the virus that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). HIV weakens your immune system, which makes it hard for your body to fight off other health problems that it could normally resist. As time goes on, your body becomes less capable of fighting off diseases. HIV is the leading cause of death for African American women between the ages of 25 and 44.

CDC recommends taking these steps to protect yourself:

- If you are sexually active (having oral, anal, or vaginal sex), use latex condoms to reduce your chances of getting HIV.
- Drug users who cannot or will not stop injecting drugs should use new, sterile syringes to prepare and inject drugs.
- If you are getting a tattoo or having your body pierced, ask what procedures they use to prevent the spread of HIV.

Lupus (lew-pus)

Lupus is a health problem in which the body attacks its own tissues and organs. It can cause many other health problems, such as trouble breathing, skin problems, arthritis, kidney problems, and headaches. No one knows for sure what causes lupus. Doctors think that lupus may be genetic. It is more common in African American women and other minorities than in White women. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that between 1979 and 1998, 70% more African American women (between 45 and 65 years old) died from Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE).

Breast cancer

Women get breast cancer when cells in the breast don't grow right, and a tumor forms. Getting a mammogram (x-ray of the breast) can help find the cancer earlier, which gives women more treatment options and improves chances for survival. Except for African Americans 20-24 years old, African American women are more likely than White women to get breast cancer before age 40. However, they are less likely than White women to get breast cancer after age 40.

- African American women are more likely than White women to die from breast cancer. Researchers are trying to find out why this happens. Some reasons may be that tumors are found at a later (more advanced) stage so there are less treatment options, or patients don't follow-up after getting abnormal test results. Other reasons might include being overweight or not being able to get a mammography.
- We do not know how to prevent breast cancer. There are things women can do to reduce their risk, such as limiting how much alcohol they drink. However, it's vital for women to take steps to find breast cancer if they have it:
 - Women aged 40 and older should have a screening mammogram every 1-2 years. Talk to your health care provider.
 - Perform a breast self-examination (BSE) every month.
- The National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP) program provides free or low-cost breast cancer testing to women who don't have health insurance. Non-profit organizations and local health clinics are the main groups who provide the tests. To learn more about this program, please contact the CDC at 1-888-842-6355 or look on the Internet at www.cdc.gov/cancer

Other Cancers

Cancers occur when certain body cells don't function right, divide uncontrollably, and produce too much tissue, resulting in a tumor. Cancerous tumors then invade healthy, normal functioning cells. New cases of certain cancers occur more often in African American women, including colorectal cancer, pancreatic cancer, and lung cancer. The death rate from colorectal cancer and pancreatic cancer is higher among African American women than other racial groups. Overall, African American women are more likely to die from cancer than persons of any other racial and ethnic group. There is not enough information to figure out why African Americans bear this cancer burden. Some reasons may be poor access to health care, poverty, tumors found at a later (more advanced) stage, different belief systems, fear of talking about cancer, and lack of trust of the medical system.

Pregnancy-related death

Every year, 30% of pregnant American women have problems before, during, or after delivery. These problems can lead to long-term health problems and sometimes, can lead to death. The main causes of pregnancy-related death are bleeding, sudden blockage in the lungs by a blood clot or amniotic fluid, and high blood pressure. African American women die in childbirth more frequently than other American women. They have a higher chance of having pregnancy-related high blood pressure (preeclampsia) and seizures from high blood pressure (eclampsia). Try to get your blood pressure checked regularly while you're pregnant. Researchers are continuing to look at the causes of racial and ethnic differences in pregnancy-related deaths.

Heart Disease

Heart disease is the main cause of death for American women. It is a group of diseases of the heart and the blood vessel system within the heart. Coronary heart disease, the most common form of heart disease, affects the blood vessels (or coronary arteries) of the heart. It causes angina and heart attacks. Angina is a pain in the chest that happens when a part of the heart does not get enough blood. It feels like a pressing or squeezing pain, often in the chest under the breastbone, but sometimes in the shoulders, arms, neck, jaw, or back. Angina seldom causes permanent damage to the heart, like a heart attack. During a heart attack, you can feel chest pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain in the center of the chest that lasts longer than a few minutes, or comes and goes, spreading pain to one or both arms, back, jaw, or stomach, or cold sweats and nausea. Some women don't have these symptoms but may have other symptoms, such as an upset stomach, burning feeling in the upper abdomen, and lightheadedness. A heart attack can cause permanent damage to the heart and maybe even death. If you experience any of these symptoms, call 911 or see your health care provider right away.

African American women are more likely to die from heart disease than other groups of women. Diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, not exercising, and smoking all put women at risk for heart disease. In addition, studies have shown that African Americans don't receive the same care for heart disease as Whites because they don't receive the same procedures and treatments.

Stroke

Lack of blood flow to the brain from a blood clot, or bleeding in the brain from a broken blood vessel, causes a stroke. Without a good blood supply, brain cells cannot get enough oxygen and begin to die. This type of damage to the brain could cause problems that may affect speech, language, movement, vision, balance, hearing, breathing, and swallowing. A stroke could also cause death. African Americans are twice as likely to die from a stroke or its complications than any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S. There are other medical problems that put you more at risk for a stroke, including diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, having already had a stroke or mini-stroke (TIA), and carotid artery disease.

To avoid heart attack and stroke, the American Heart Association advises people to take the following steps:

- Don't smoke.
- Control your blood pressure. Ask your health care provider what a healthy number is for you and how often you need your blood pressure checked.
- Eat healthy.
- Lower your cholesterol to the right level, based on your personal risk.
- Get at least 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Ask your health care provider what a healthy weight is for you.
- Have a normal fasting blood glucose level (below 110 mg/dL). Ask your health care provider when you should be tested.

High Cholesterol (koh-les-ter-awl)

Over 25% of American women have blood cholesterol levels high enough to put them at risk for heart disease. Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in all parts of the body. It comes from two sources: your body and the food you eat. Your liver makes all the cholesterol your body needs. Eating too much cholesterol in animal foods like meats, whole milk dairy products, and egg yolks can make your cholesterol go up. Cholesterol blocks blood from flowing easily through your body. The higher your cholesterol, the greater your risk for heart disease. High cholesterol is a health problem for African American women. However, African American women have lower cholesterol levels than White women. Control your cholesterol by getting your cholesterol checked, exercising, eating foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and keeping a healthy weight. Ask your health care provider about how often you should get your cholesterol checked.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

Over 25 diseases are spread by sexual activity. Some STDs seem to affect certain groups more than others. Overall, African Americans have higher rates of STDs than Whites for chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes, and hepatitis B. While no method is 100% protective against STDs, there are ways that help prevent getting STDs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offer this advice:

- Do not have sex.
- If you have sex, use latex condoms.
- Being in a long-term relationship with one person who has been tested for STDs and does not have any STDs lowers your risk.

Asthma

Asthma is a disease of the lung airways. With asthma, the airways are inflamed (swollen) and react easily to certain "triggers," like viruses, smoke, dust, mold, animal hair, roaches, or pollen. When the inflamed airways react, they get narrow and make it hard to breathe.

Common asthma symptoms are:

- wheezing
- coughing
- shortness of breath
- chest tightness

When these symptoms get worse, it's an asthma attack.

More than 17 million people in the U.S. have asthma, and women are more likely than men to die from asthma, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Asthma is a growing concern in this country, especially for African Americans. African Americans go into the hospital more than Whites because of asthma and are more likely to die from asthma. These factors could increase the risk for getting asthma:

- air pollution
- poverty
- poor housing

- lack of education
- can't get to a doctor

Uterine Fibroids

Uterine fibroids are tumors or growths, made up of muscle cells and other tissues that grow within the wall of the uterus (or womb). Although fibroids are sometimes called tumors, they are almost always benign (not cancerous). Fibroids can grow as a single growth or in clusters (or groups). Their size can vary from small, like an apple seed (or less than one inch), to even larger than a grapefruit, or eight inches across or more. No one knows for sure what causes fibroids. Researchers have some theories, but most likely, fibroids are the result of many factors interacting with each other. These factors could be hormonal (affected by estrogen levels), genetic (running in families), environmental, or a combination of all three. Because no one knows for sure what causes fibroids, we also don't know what causes them to grow or shrink. For the most part, fibroids stop growing or shrink after menopause. But, this is not true for all women with fibroids.

Most of the time, fibroids grow in women of childbearing age. While no one knows for sure what will increase a woman's chances of getting fibroids, researchers have found that African American women are 2 to 3 times more likely to get them than women of other racial groups. African American women also tend to get fibroids at a younger age than do other women with fibroids.

Sickle Cell Anemia

Sickle cell anemia (sih-kul sell uh-nee-mee-uh) is a blood disorder, passed down from parents to children. It involves problems the red blood cells. Normal red blood cells are round and smooth and move through blood vessels easily. Sickle cells are hard and have a curved edge. These cells cannot squeeze through small blood vessels. They block the organs from getting blood. Your body destroys sickle red cells quickly, but it can't make new red blood cells fast enough-- a condition called anemia. Sickle cell anemia can cause serious health problems:

- pain and swelling the hands and feet
- fatigue
- shortness of breath
- pain in any organ or joint
- eye damage
- yellow color in skin and eyes
- slow to grow
- hard to fight infections
- stroke
- chest pain
- fever

Every year, about one in 500 African Americans are born with sickle cell anemia. This means that they got the sickle gene from both parents. People who have only one gene are carriers of the sickle cell, but won't get sickle cell anemia themselves. They can pass the gene to their children. It is estimated that one in 12 African Americans have one sickle cell gene.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a condition in which your bones become thin, brittle, weak, and more likely to break. A combination of things, not all of which you can control, can increase your chances of getting osteoporosis. These include:

- being female
- a small, thin body frame
- a family history of the disease
- postmenopausal or advanced age
- abnormal absence of menstrual periods
- eating disorders (anorexia or bulimia)
- a diet low in calcium and vitamin D
- inactive lifestyle
- cigarette smoking
- long-term use of glucocorticoids (medicines for many diseases like arthritis, asthma, and lupus)

While White and Asian women have the highest rates of osteoporosis, African American women are at risk as well. As African American women get older, their risk of developing osteoporosis more closely resembles the risk of White women. Lupus and sickle cell anemia, which are more common in African American women, increase the risk for osteoporosis.

Making sure to get enough calcium and exercise in the teen years and beyond can help prevent osteoporosis later in life. Your health care provider can find out if you have osteoporosis by giving you a bone mineral density test, which takes pictures like x-rays of the skeleton. If you are getting osteoporosis, you can prevent future bone fractures by having a calcium-rich diet, daily exercise, and drug therapy. There are a variety of drugs available to help preserve or increase bone mass. Talk with your health care provider about what is best for you.

Tuberculosis (TB)

Tuberculosis is a disease caused by a bacteria. While it can affect any part of your body, it usually attacks your lungs. TB is spread through the air. If someone with TB of the lungs or throat coughs or sneezes, people nearby who breathe in the bacteria may get TB. Some people who breathe in the bacteria may not have symptoms and can't give it to other people. This is called latent TB infection. If the body can't stop the bacteria from growing, people develop TB disease. If this happens and the TB is in the lungs, it can cause several symptoms:

- bad cough (with blood or phlegm)
- chest pain

- fatigue
- weight loss
- loss of appetite
- chills
- fever
- sweating at night

Among all women with TB, 81% of TB cases affect minority women. African American women have the highest number of TB cases, compared to all other women.

Infant Deaths

Understanding infant death is difficult and can bring anger, pain, sadness, and confusion. Causes of infant deaths vary, but could include Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), congenital anomalies, pre-term/low birthweight, problems from pregnancy, accidents, or respiratory distress syndrome. African American women have the highest number of infant deaths in the U.S. These health problems are prevented in different ways. You can improve your chances of having a healthy baby by taking these steps:

- Visit your health care provider as soon as you find out you're pregnant. Continue to go during your pregnancy.
- Talk to your health care provider about taking a vitamin with folic acid and iron.
- Talk to your health care provider about how much weight you should gain.
- Drink lots of fluids and eat foods high in protein and fiber such as whole wheat breads, whole-grain cereals, fruits (apples, pears, strawberries), nuts, seeds, and beans. Avoid high-fat and fried foods.
- Talk to your health care provider to make sure you've had all the vaccines (shots) you need.
- Talk to your health care provider about what exercises will help you.
- Don't touch cat litter or undercooked meat.
- Avoid hot tubs, saunas, and steam rooms.
- Tell your health care provider about medicines you take, both prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines.
- Don't use recreational drugs, smoke, or drink alcohol.
- Avoid insecticides and products that have lead, mercury, or solvents (such as paint thinner).

Getting Health Care

Although this isn't a problem with the health of women, it can lead to health problems because many women can't get the right health services, medicines, and supplies when they need them. Some reasons include:

- They can't pay for it and don't have health insurance.
- They have no way to get to a doctor.
- They have physical limitations that make it hard to get to a doctor.
- They don't understand the language.
- There are a lot of reasons why there are differences in health among women. Lack of health insurance is a major stumbling block to health care for African American women. Compared with White women, African American women are twice as likely to lack health insurance. Below are resources for women to help them get health care services.

What types of health care coverage exist? How do I find out about them?

Finding health insurance often requires good research and finding answers to lots of questions. There are a number of different kinds of health care coverage:

Private Insurance

- Employer sponsored -- fully or partly paid by an employer, includes health maintenance organizations, preferred provider organizations, and point of service plans. Contact your employer for information on plans available to you.
- Individual insurance -- private health insurance that a person buys through an insurance company. You may want to talk to an insurance broker, who can tell you more about the health care plans that are available for individuals. Some states also provide insurance for very small groups or people who are self-employed. You may also want to go to the Quality Interagency Coordination Task Force Web site on health care quality at <http://www.consumer.gov/qualityhealth/> for information on selecting a health plan. If you do not have access to the Internet, or don't know how to use a computer, call 1-800-994-WOMAN (1-800-994-9662).

Public Insurance

- Medicare -- federal government health insurance program for people 65 and older, or who are disabled, or who have permanent kidney failure. You can call the Social Security Administration at 1-800-772-1213 or contact your local Social Security Office for more information.
- Medicaid -- federal and state health insurance program run by states for low-income or disabled people of all ages. Click on <http://cms.hhs.gov/medicaid/tollfree.asp> for a list of Medicaid toll-free lines in each state. If you do not have access to the Internet, or don't know how to use a computer, call 1-800-994-WOMAN (1-800-994-9662).

For more information on health insurance, contact these organizations:

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Phone: (800) 358-9295

Internet Address: <http://www.ahrq.gov>

Bureau of Primary Health Care

Phone: (800) 400-2742

Internet Address: <http://www.bphc.hrsa.gov/>

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)

Phone: 877-267-2323

Internet Address: <http://www.cms.hhs.gov>

Health Insurance Association of America

Phone: 202-824-1600

Internet Address: http://www.hiaa.org/index_flash.cfm

For More Information...

You can find out more about health problems in African American women by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at 800-994-WOMAN (9662), visiting the NWHIC Minority Women's section (<http://www.4woman.gov/minority/index.cfm>), and contacting the following organizations:

Office of Minority Health

Phone: (301) 443-5224 (301) 589-0951 (TDD line) (800) 444-6472 (Publications)

Internet address: <http://www.omhrc.gov>

Office of Minority and Women's Health

Phone: (301) 594-4490

Internet address: <http://bphc.hrsa.gov/OMWH/home.HTM>

All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission from the Office on Women's Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Citation of source is appreciated.

May 2003